



Up close: a British soldier and an Iraqi boy in al-Qurna, where the platoon went on foot patrol wearing berets, not helmets, two weeks ago

The Brits really are superior

RICHARD DOWDEN explains why the American forces, which operate like the German army and gear everything to military might, will make bad peacekeepers in Iraq

As the role of the American and British armies in Iraq turns from attack to occupation, deep differences will emerge in their styles of operation and in the training that lies behind them. Put simply, if Iraqis turn against the occupying forces, the Americans will kill far more civilians in accidental shootings and overreaction than the British.

British soldiers are generally regarded as better peacekeepers because of their experience in Northern Ireland, but although Ireland helped shape their training and thinking, the reasons go far deeper than this. I have watched both armies at close quarters, close enough to be arrested by their soldiers. In 1973, I was arrested in Derry in Northern Ireland by a frightened patrol led by a very jumpy officer. The patrol had been fired on earlier that day. They were badly co-ordinated and clearly were making up the tactics as they went along. I was bundled – fairly roughly – into the back of a Saracen armoured car and driven off to the barracks to be photographed and fingerprinted. When they found I was English they were suspicious, but let me go. I did, however, get a taste of what it must be like to be a young Catholic in Derry, picked up for being in the wrong place at the wrong moment.

Treatment like that, the British realised, was the best recruitment campaign for the IRA, and gradually the “show ‘em who’s boss” brigade in the army lost out to more subtle approaches. Whatever Sir John Stevens has found about co-operation between military

intelligence and the loyalist paramilitaries, the mainstream British army grew more sophisticated over 35 years. In Ballymurphy much later, I watched a patrol operating perfectly as a team, covering each other at every turn and being almost unobtrusive compared to a few years earlier. They no longer picked up people randomly off the streets and would often back off from confronting youths with petrol bombs. Although the IRA had not stopped shooting at them, the soldiers had learnt how to patrol without tangling with the locals. They had also developed one extraordinary ability, an ability that defies the deepest instincts of any trained fighter: they did not always fire back when fired on.

In 1992, I was the Americans’ first prisoner in Somalia. At that stage, no one had offered any resistance to the farcical marine landings on the beach at Mogadishu – farcical because it was already held by Pakistani UN peacekeepers and hundreds of journalists. I went to the port, which the marines decided to take with extreme force. As they came up the jetty they fired at me, then sprinted up screaming: “Get down. Get your fucking face in the dirt.” One jabbed his gun to my ear as I lay on the ground, while another grabbed my bag and tore at my clothes in a clumsy search. Then they marched me up the jetty to where other journalists and our Somali guards, drivers and translators were waiting. “Whites over here. Somalis over there,” they ordered, making the Somalis lie down in the dust to search them. I tried to ►

► argue, but a panicky sergeant told me those were his orders. "If you do that, you will lose here," I told him, but he wouldn't or couldn't listen. By such small but telling incidents, the Americans turned suspicious but welcoming Somalis into a nation united in its determination to chase the occupiers out.

Somalia was a double disaster for the Americans, because they lost and learnt nothing from it. Canada, Italy, France and Belgium held inquiries into atrocities that they committed against Somalis and investigated why the operation went wrong. The Americans, who killed and maimed far more Somalis than anyone else and lost 18 of their special forces on the night of 3 October 1993, shrugged off the failure as the fault of the UN. They never held a public inquiry into what had gone wrong.

The one lesson US politicians learnt was that these foreign places were dangerous and "another Vietnam" was to be avoided at all costs. When US forces went to the Balkans in 1995, the order to the generals was: "No body bags." As a result, the ordinary soldiers were sent out in armoured vehicles, hiding under helmets and body armour and not allowed any contact with local people. At Christmas these young men, hyped up with the prospect of action, were barely allowed out of barracks. The result was a rash of suicides.

During the same operation, the Brits were deployed as an urban policing force, as they would be in Belfast during the marching season. General Sir Michael Jackson, now Chief of the Defence Staff, consulted his non-commissioned officers and decided that the troops would wear berets instead of helmets, carry their guns pointing downwards, and show their faces and fraternise wherever they could. No one attacked them.

US army generals would never consult with their most junior officers as Jackson did. Once operations start, the NCOs run the British army. Officers issue aims and objectives; NCOs, each in charge of eight men, say how things are to be done. They are picked for initiative and intelligence. The US army is organised on German lines: orders are issued from above and passed down to soldiers who are simply expected to obey.

A recent study by the US marines complained that the Afghanistan campaign of 2002 was run from a headquarters 7,000 miles away and in a different time zone. Soldiers worked up to 16 hours a day while they waited for their commanders in Florida to wake up and get to the office. Sometimes targets were identified, but the troops on the ground had to wait for hours for permission to attack.

In the US army, the lowest-ranking officers are less broadly trained than their British counterparts. American officers go to military college while their British equivalents will mostly go to university as well, because Britain's armed forces want officers to have a broader education. The

US recruits its troops from lower social strata than their British equivalents, and new recruits are put through dehumanising experiences. At the marines' training camp, new recruits are brought in at 4am and the trainers boast how they break them down and remake them. Recruits at the US officer training college at West Point have to walk round the buildings with their left shoulder always touching a wall. When they enter a room, they must walk along the left-hand wall to reach an exit door on the other side. Bizarre, but all part of inculcating absolute obedience.

That goes to the heart of what an army is for. Britain sees roles for the army in several theatres, of which the battlefield is only one. The US sees its army as the big stick, designed simply to attack and win. Being the biggest and most powerful in the world, America's top brass see everything in terms of winning by superior military might. They train their soldiers to be killers. The "Kill 'em All" cheerfully emblazoned on the helmets of US soldiers in this recent war would not be allowed in the British army.

To define the contrast in styles you need go no further than the PR blurbs on the US and British marines' websites. The former produces "the ultimate warrior" and the key words are "honor, courage and commitment". At Parris Island, South Carolina: "We believe that Marines are forged in a furnace of shared hardship and tough training... [so that] Marines will let nothing stand in their way." The Royal Marines are Britain's "go-anywhere force". The keywords are versatility and professionalism. "The training, advice, specialist support and training support provided... is the adhesive that bonds the whole Royal Marines Command... a newly qualified Marine or Officer could... go to Bosnia, Ulster or be part of a specialised force sent to provide humanitarian relief."

It is an irony that Britain, which once ruled an empire, should have a more flexible and sensitive army than America, which has never tried to rule anyone's territory. Britain's modern army

was forged in imperial times. It used shock and awe to establish that empire. At the end of the 19th century, the howitzer and the Maxim gun were the equivalent of the cruise missile and the tankbuster. But, once in control, the British had to rely on awe more than shock to keep the natives down. They deployed ritual and illusion, magnificent parades and uniforms to impress the oppressed.

To play the magician needed a more subtle psychological approach. A way had to be found of not letting people forget who was boss while at the same time allowing, even encouraging, them to live in their traditional ways and lead their own lives. That meant understanding and respecting local culture and customs. It is a lesson that the American army, perhaps America itself, has yet to learn.

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